

Write the Fight

By Marti Verlander

“Sure, I’ll give a woman a black belt. I’ll throw it on her grave after she’s dead.”

I heard this as a new student of martial arts. The quote was attributed to the grandmaster Seiyu Oyata. Fortunately for me, he adapted to American ways, and I eventually earned a 5th-degree black belt from him, as the first woman accepted as his personal student. For eighteen years, I studied and taught RyuTe Karate[®], including eight years in my own dojo. What I learned during those years, I can share to help any writer create a more vivid and realistic fight scene.

Details make scenes come alive, but if a writer doesn’t know fighting and its body language, he may skip details and write in generalities.

Consider the effectiveness of the following passages:

Geoff sized up his opponent carefully, trying to look larger and meaner than he was, dreading the battle ahead of him. Then his enemy charged.

Or

Geoff watched the way his opponent leaned forward, slightly off-balance. The too-wide stance favored Geoff, too. Anger snarled the man’s face. Geoff relaxed his own muscles, settled into calmness, his feet squarely under his shoulders. He widened his eyes under lowered brows. Then his enemy charged.

As brief as the second paragraph is, each detail represents a specific principle of effective fighting technique.

In classical martial arts, two masters could never fight, because neither would make the initial move. Both know that he who moves first, loses. Each desires the other to commit first. When his opponent’s foot moves, the warrior attacks the weight-bearing leg with lightning-swift reflexes to destroy balance, and the fight will end quickly.

Balance is necessary for good technique. A top warrior will be relaxed, feet squarely under his shoulders, knees flexed rather than locked. His weight shifts slightly forward, but his body doesn’t lean. Arms remain loose at his sides, because from there they can reach anywhere within his body space. An opponent must invade that zone to hurt him, so he doesn’t reach outside it to defend himself. He thereby conserves energy without putting balance at risk.

He watches the area in front of his opponent’s collarbone notch – not the notch itself, but the air a little in front of it. Watching a specific place will fixate him, causing him to miss peripheral movement. His awareness encompasses all of his opponent.

To intimidate, he displays erect, confident posture. He is relaxed, because tight muscles move more slowly than loose ones. He doesn’t squint to appear ferocious but widens his eyes without lifting his eyebrows, like a madman. Light tension radiates out from his center.

A trained warrior knows how to use space to his advantage. Stepping closer to an opponent invades his personal space and applies psychological pressure. His strides do

not mince, nor do they stretch. His arms swing naturally from the shoulder to take up space, to command the area and make him appear larger. He moves all-of-a-piece, smoothly and in perfect control. His head doesn't swivel as he walks; that would appear fearful and unsure. His glances are natural and unafraid.

The master consciously observes everything around him to watch for trouble, scout terrain advantages and disadvantages, and search for whatever can help or hinder him. He prefers to observe potential conflict from far away first.

If the warrior must choose between speed and power, he will choose speed. A mighty blow from his enemy may kill him, but not if his own strike lands first. He knows that an open hand is faster than a closed fist, because energy feeds out through the fingertips. He wants it not to flow back into his own body, but outward, into his opponent.

The open hand's striking surface is not the edge of the hand itself, but the bone below it, or the wrist bone, for greater penetration and more painful strikes to nerve points. He twists his hand at the instant of impact, also to increase penetration.

If the warrior chooses to use a fist, he closes his hand only as it makes contact, to maximize speed and power. Again, he twists on impact.

As with any weapon, he uses all surfaces of his hand, not just the obvious ones – palm, knuckles, wrist edge, back wrist edge, fingertips, thumb – each for its own purpose and effect.

Timing is also critical, but he does not confuse it with speed. A perfect parry thrown a half-second too fast misses the incoming fist. If that happens, the warrior is not too good for his own good; he is not good enough. He must match his opponent's timing, even if that means he must slow his own reflexes.

The warrior uses eye contact effectively. To be polite, he will hold another's gaze for three or four seconds only. To challenge, he will hold it longer, knowing the other will either submit or start a fight. When he ends the eye contact, he looks away, but not down; he is not submitting.

The warrior controls himself, inside and out, the result of long hours over many years spent training and fighting. He does not brag or boast or swagger or threaten. He need not. His opponent may speak as he wishes, and the warrior will ignore him. The mouth cannot harm him physically, nor does it change what is true. He wastes no energy on such things, but he doesn't mind if his opponent does. His own message is in his technique, not in his mouth.

A warrior carries himself with pride and confidence, with power and fluidity, but without tension. His general appearance and the way he moves are warning enough, to anyone who knows the language, that he is dangerous, that they would do better to seek their prey elsewhere. And so he rarely needs to fight.

For writers, none of these details is "right" or "wrong." Their usage depends on the character and circumstances.

If the hero isn't a highly trained fighter, maybe he'll narrow his eyes and frown in concentration, rather than using the "mad man" look. That doesn't mean he'll lose the

fight; the wide-eyed look is more effective, but it's only one detail in a complex "dance" between opponents.

Every detail given here can be topsy-turvied for a character who's untrained. Maybe the hero stands with his feet too far apart, making him slower and easier to unbalance. Maybe he'll defend a swing that wouldn't have hit him anyway, and feel foolish for it. Maybe he'll throw a wild punch, rather than a straight and direct one.

The goal, no matter how apt or inept the character, is to portray action with the kind of detail that creates a gripping, authentic sequence.

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